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Reagan to make second 'damage-control' TV appearance

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President Reagan, his Teflon shield nicked by revelations of secret U.S. arms shipments to Iran, will face a national television audience again this week in an effort to bolster his credibility and that of his senior advisers.

The Iran affair, which Mr. Reagan first addressed publicly in a televised speech last Thursday, has preoccupied the administration for weeks.

Administration officials say it is too early to tell whether the president's Iran strategy will pay off or prove to be an embarrassing blunder.

But there is certainty that Mr. Reagan and his senior advisers will be put under intense scrutiny, beginning in a Wednesday evening press conference, over the decision to sell arms to Iran — a nation the United States still accuses of fostering terrorism.

The solidly Democratic Congress is unlikely to lend a sympathetic ear when the White House sends a representative to the House and Senate intelligence committees to defend the Iranian venture.

Mr. Reagan is expected to claim executive privilege and protect National Security Adviser John Poindexter and other National Security Council aides from testifying under oath.

CIA Director William Casey, who must answer to Congress, is likely to take the greatest heat.

Looking further down the road, there is speculation that the Iranian negotiations could result in the resignation of some Reagan administration officials who opposed the president's policy decision and played no part in carrying out what became an NSC-CIA operation.

On the political front, the Iranian affair has done damage to the presidential aspirations of Vice President George Bush and other Republican candidates in the 1988 election. Mr. Bush in particular has the choice of disassociating himself from Mr. Reagan's policy decision or of being forced to defend it.

Unless unfolding events prove that Mr. Reagan's overtures to Iranian moderates were successful in ending the 6-year-old Iran-Iraq war and state-sponsored terrorism in Tehran, the Democrats are likely to try to keep the issue alive to bludgeon the Republicans for the next two years.

The international implications of Mr. Reagan's gamble are enormous. Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who stops just short of saying that he opposed the policy decision and acknowledges that he had only fragmentary knowledge of it, is in an almost untenable position.

Although Mr. Reagan has acknowledged the Iranian contacts,

Mr. Shultz must continue to declare to other nations that the United States does not negotiate with terrorists and maintains an arms embargo on both sides in the Iran-Iraq war.

It is impossible to know the extent of damage to American relations with its Arab friends who fear the

Iranians more, if possible, than they fear Israel.

On the domestic front, White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan told reporters last week that congressional leaders were not informed of the Iranian contacts because Attorney General Edwin Meese III assured the White House there was no need to notify them.

Mr. Poindexter said the adminis-

tration knew there was a risk that the operation would be exposed. "If you are unwilling to take risks, you seldom make any progress on some of these very difficult issues. We knew there would be questions raised as to whether this was a good idea or not but on balance the president decided to go ahead with it."

He said the four-day mission to Iran by former National Security Adviser Robert C. McFarlane was racing the clock on the entire set of issues including the fate of the hos-

tages, the Iran-Iraq war and the possibility that the 86-year-old Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini would pass from the scene.

The president and his men have said the United States did nothing to benefit Hezbollah or Islamic Jihad, the captors of the American hostages. They say the shipment of the equivalent of one plane load of military spare parts and anti-aircraft weaponry was a "judgment call," designed to assure "our interlocutors" in Iran they were really dealing with the president himself.

The chief argument of those who oppose Mr. Reagan's initiative is that it created the impression that all terrorists have to do to obtain arms from the United States is seize more American hostages.

Unanswered questions abound. None of the pronouncements of Mr. Reagan or his aides, now engaged in a massive "damage control" operation with the media, have stated who convinced the president to approve the deal.

No official will discuss whether the United States condoned Israeli arms shipments to Iran. No official has publicly named the Iranian moderates with whom Mr. McFarlane met. The only explanation of why the Joint Chiefs of Staff were left out of the decision is that it involved an intelligence operation, not a military one.

Mr. Reagan has been a popular chief executive and few would deny that he also has been a very lucky one.

He may still pull the Iranian affair out of the fire. But in 1980, it was Iran that sank President Carter's political future. It is Iran that now has Mr. Reagan in a near-desperate defense of his gamble.